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## ABSTRACT

The annotated bibliography is designed to be of help to teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) to an often overlooked population--adult language learners in non-academic settings and adult education programs. And for this group there is typically little research available on second language acquisition (as distinguished from second language learning). This annotated bibliography highlights the journal articles and other documents in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database and represents what there is and addresses important issues for second language acquisition for adult populations. The documents and journals represent approaches being used by researchers and educators to study adult language learners, including those for whom English is the target language. Twelve references are fully annotated and highlighted. Twenty-two standard references are also included. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)



# An Annotated Bibliography of Second Language Acquisition in Adult English Language Learners

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National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE)  
October, 2001

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## An Annotated Bibliography of Second Language Acquisition in Adult English Language Learners

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The terms second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning are often used interchangeably. The difference may be arguable. Both are concerned with the development of communicative competence and the transfer of competence in a first language to a second language (Gass & Selinker, 1992). SLA is generally viewed as a multifaceted process that occurs spontaneously in communicative situations. Second language learning is generally considered a conscious, knowledge-accumulating process that usually takes place through formal education (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999; Lalleman, 1996; Yule, G., 1996).

Most of the work in SLA focuses on children, particularly those in bilingual or multilingual environments. The body of SLA research on adults focuses on populations in post-secondary educational settings. There is little SLA research on adult language learners in non-academic settings and adult education programs.

SLA research among learners in adult education programs is primarily observational and focused on moving adults from proficiency in their first language to the ability to function in the second language as full participants in society and on programmatic issues rather than linguistic processes. There are growing numbers of immigrants in adult education programs and limited resources and time to provide quality instruction to them (Burt & Keenan, 1998). Because of this, research with adults in non-academic settings focuses more on programmatic issues and examining profiles and models that can be replicated, looking at how adults manipulate their immediate learning needs rather than how they acquire a second language. For example, publications of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) are indicative of the kind of research that is being done in adult populations. (See <http://gseweb.harvard.edu/-ncsall/>.) Research foci include learner persistence, program impact, and staff development. This is not to say that researchers are unaware of the need to investigate SLA, but they see more immediate work that needs to be addressed.

There appear to be no language development theories that could accurately describe and explain the process of how an adult acquires a second language (Gregg, 1999). Thus, explaining and predicting how adults learn a second language remains an important area to be investigated. The extensive literature on children's first and second language acquisition cannot be extended without qualification to adults since, in adults, "language development and cognitive maturation are no longer indissolubly interwoven" (Extra & van Hout, 1996, p. 89).

However, there are some articles on second language acquisition for adults. The following

annotated bibliography of journal articles and documents in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database represents what there is and addresses important issues in SLA for adult populations. The documents and journals represent approaches being used by researchers and educators to study adult language learners, including those for whom English is the target language.

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## Journal Articles and Research Reports

Bongaerts, T.; van Summeren, C.; Planken, B.; Schils, E. (1997). Age and ultimate attainment in the pronunciation of a foreign language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 19(4), 447-65.

Notions about the critical period for SLA have been around for some time. The first part of this article reviews studies of age and the acquisition of a second language. Some are based on theories of neurological development (beginning with Lenneberg, 1967) that say that after the onset of puberty language-first or second--cannot be mastered. Others argue that foreign accents are perceptually based (Flege 1987, 1992, 1995) -- the ear is either able to discriminate minute differences in speech sounds, or will hear sounds only in categories - and that adults who tend to have developed phonetic categories will not pay attention to subtleties. This becomes particularly evident when the sound in the second language is close to that of the first language. (For example, differentiating the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ when speaking English may not have meaning to a native Russian speaker.)

Others like Klein (1995) argue that learners can attain a native-like pronunciation even if they acquire the language at a later age. However, to do so they need access to much input in the target language, and it must be very important to them that they sound like a native speaker of the language they are learning.

The second part of the article describes two studies of highly successful late language learners. The researchers conclude that some adult learners attain native-like pronunciation proficiency, but they are the exception. Further studies are suggested.

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Carlo, M.S., & Sylvester, E.S. (1996). *Adult second-language reading research: How may it inform assessment and instruction?* NCAL Technical Report 96-08. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania. 57pp. (EDRS No. ED 412 373). Available: [www.literacyonline.org/products/ncal/pdf/TR9608.pdf](http://www.literacyonline.org/products/ncal/pdf/TR9608.pdf))

This report reviews studies on L2 reading processes ranging from low-level letter-recognition processes to higher-level reading processes such as metacognitive strategy (e. g., guessing meaning from context, using picture clues, looking at word derivation) use. The studies involve a number of languages and include implications for instruction and evaluation in ESL. The authors use C.A. Perfetti's Verbal Efficiency Theory (VET) as a framework to organize and evaluate the SLA studies they cite. VET, designed for L1 reading, takes a comprehensive look at the spectrum of abilities that are involved in the reading process. Basically, the approach is that the "more efficient the reader is at identifying a word and accessing its

meaning, the better able he or she will be to integrate the meaning of words and the propositions they form within and across sentences, to make inferences on the basis of this information, and to interpret and critically evaluate the content of a text" (p. 4). Studies cover local text processes (letter recognition, word recognition, and lexical access); text modeling processes (prior knowledge); use of text structure in L2 reading; and strategy use in second language reading. The authors then summarize how research on text-modeling processes informs instruction. The authors also provide a series of implications that low-level reading-component processing can aid in the evaluation of student progress in L2 reading; that L2 readers of alphabetic scripts need to develop fast and accurate decoding skills; that the use of authentic materials is much more effective than adapted materials; and that attention needs to be given to students' use of reading strategies. An extensive list of references is provided.

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Koda, K. (1999). Development of L2 intraword orthographic sensitivity and decoding skills. *Modern Language Journal*, 83(1), 51-64.

Are there differences among adult English learners with alphabetic and non-alphabetic L1 backgrounds in understanding the internal orthographic structure of words? How do they use this sensitivity to decode an L2, in this case English? To address these questions, the author recruited Chinese and Korean subjects who had been in the United States for six months or less. The subjects were given two decoding tests: the Word Attack subsection of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test (Woodcock, 1973) and a constructed homophone judgment test. The first consisted of 50 pseudo-English words, or pronounceable letter-strings. The second consisted of 30 pairs of a high-frequency English word and a pronounceable letter-string (e.g., "rain" and "rane"). "The task was to determine whether the two stimuli in each pair shared the same phonological code" (p. 56). The findings suggest that those whose L1 is alphabetic (i.e. the basic unit is a phoneme such as Korean Hangul) tend to rely more heavily on intraword analysis in getting to a word's phonology, whereas logographic readers (i.e. where the basic unit is a morpheme such as Chinese) tend to retrieve phonological information through whole-word activation. The author concludes that when designing materials or curricula for L2 instruction, educators need to take the L1 backgrounds of their students into account rather than using materials developed for native speakers of the language.

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Jordens, P. & Lalleman, J., Eds. (1996). Investigating second language acquisition. *Studies on language acquisition*, 12. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter. (EDRS No. ED 405 736. Full text not available from EDRS.)

This volume of essays comes from a course that was offered at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands. It covers various areas of SLA including methodological issues, processing, syntax, phonology, the lexicon, and acquisition and learning. Three of the articles may be of interest to educators in adult language programs. Josine Lalleman covers the state of the art in SLA up to the mid 1990s. Guus Extra and Roeland van Hout provide some insight into a study they did of Moroccan and Turkish adult immigrants who acquired Dutch "spontaneously," primarily through social interaction. Finally, Peter Jordens discusses input

and instruction in second language acquisition. Jordens concludes that "if we want input and instruction to be effective, we have to take into account that principles of learning and processing interact with the structural properties of the language to be learned. ... [T]his interaction is conditioned by three types of linguistic constraint: domains of generalization, clustering, and prerequisite linguistic knowledge" (pp. 442-443).

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Newton, J., & Kennedy, G. (1996). Effects of communication tasks on the grammatical relations marked by second language learners. *System* 24(3), 309-22.

Communication tasks provide opportunities for learners to negotiate and clarify meaning in the language they are learning. They represent the goal of learning (using the language to communicate successfully) and the means to achieve that goal (appropriate instructional activity). These two, goal and means, are often the basis for program design. The tasks then are to provide meaning-based interaction linked with the goal of most language learners -- to communicate effectively. The authors discuss various approaches that researchers have used to study task-based teaching and the effect these approaches have on learners.

The authors then describe a study based on transcripts of two groups of upper intermediate-level speakers of English who are also pre-university level. The researchers gave them four tasks that involved shared information and split information. One of the shared information tasks involved a medical dilemma where "the learners were asked to discuss and reach consensus on the order of priority of a list of critically ill patients for receiving heart surgery" (p. 314). One of the split information tasks also involved a medical dilemma. "The personal details of a number of medical patients as well as a series of criteria for selecting the most suitable patient for surgery were divided equally among the learners who were required to exchange information, and use it to work out which patient would be selected for surgery" (p. 314-15).

The conclusion from this study is that language learning tasks can be selected to influence the occurrence not only of more or less talk and negotiations but also of particular linguistic features and structures. Split information tasks encourage more interaction and negotiation than shared information tasks. However, the shared information tasks can be used "to encourage reasoning, argumentation, conjecture, and other pragmatic behaviors" (p. 321).

Oliver, R. (March 2000). Age differences in negotiation and feedback in classroom and pairwork. *Language Learning*, 50(1), 119-51.

The focus of this article is whether there are differences in the provision and use of negative feedback (NF) with adults and children in teacher-fronted lessons and in pair-work tasks. It provides a good review of the studies conducted so far on the process of input in second language acquisition.

Positive evidence is the "input or models that language learners receive about the target language" (p. 120). Positive evidence can be provided authentically, such as in natural conversations, or in foreigner talk discourse, (Ferguson, 1971), or in teacher talk.

Negative evidence provides information to learners about what is not possible in the target

language. Negative evidence can be provided preemptively, such as in explanations of grammar rules, or reactively, such as through error correction. Reactive negative evidence is also called negative feedback (NF) since it highlights the differences between the target language and the learner's output. In addition, NF can be explicit (error correction) or implicit (communication breakdown). Usually with the latter the parties enter into a process of negotiating meaning that entails such strategies as repetition, confirmation, and clarification, or even recasting utterances. Long (1996) reports that all of these negotiation strategies as well as the explicit error correction can be considered NF.

Following Long's model, the author offers the following examples of implicit NF.

*Implicit negative feedback : recasting*

Nonnative student: I think a Perth.

Teacher: You think it's Perth.

*Implicit negative feedback: confirmation*

Nonnative speaker: Yes, so both side.

Native speaker: One on the left and one on the right?

Non-native speaker: Yeah

*Implicit negative feedback: confirmation and recasting*

Nonnative speaker: And I've two-two cup.

Native speaker: You have two cups?

Nonative speaker: Yeah. (p. 121)

Earlier studies of negative feedback indicated that it was ineffective with second language learners. However, recent studies indicate that negative feedback can provide the learners with information and data that promote their language acquisition. The author lists the age-related studies of NF with different age groups and in classroom contexts.

In this study, the author collected data from 30 classrooms (20 adult and 10 child ESL classes) and 32 native speaker-nonnative speaker dyads (16 adult and 16 child dyads). She found no significant differences in the use of NF in either context (teacher-fronted or pair-work tasks). In each case, learners were consistently and frequently provided with NF, and they used the feedback in subsequent opportunities to produce language. There was significant difference in the patterns of interaction when it came to age, however. For example, adults provided NF more often than children; children were much more tolerant of non-native like pronunciation in the L2 and thus did not provide NF.

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Pennington, M.C. (1998). The teachability of phonology in adulthood: A re-examination. *IRAL*, 36(4), 323-41.

Even though the teaching of pronunciation has increased in some situations, it is still considered by many as somewhat useless or inappropriate. Phonology (and pronunciation) tend to be relegated to theoretical and general linguistics rather than to second language practice and research. The author asserts that in many teacher preparation programs it is not considered central to language teaching. She cites a study (Morley, 1994) that investigated attitudes toward teaching pronunciation and found long-standing views that it does not have an effect on performance and that accented speech is not a problem.

The author argues however, that even though it is difficult for adults to master pronunciation, they should receive explicit instruction in it just as they receive explicit instruction in grammar. To ignore this important part of language acquisition puts learners at a disadvantage both socially and professionally.

Pennington concludes that instruction can be done in such a way that the learner "will be able to re-conceptualize the targets for phonological performance, e.g., through explicit comparison of the phonology of the second language with that of the native language, through explicit and implicit comparisons of the second language in different varieties and different social situations, and through focused listening and speaking activities" (p. 337). She also states that feedback can raise learners' awareness of their own acquisition of phonology.

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Salaberry, M.R. (2000). The acquisition of English past tense in an instructional setting. *System*, 28(1), 135-52.

In discussing the learning of inflectional morphology (e. g., English third person "s" on present tense verbs or the English past tense "ed"), Nation (1999) points out that "the use of inflection is clearly rule-based and so it would seem a straightforward matter to teach and learn [the rules]. However, the persistence of errors in their use (or nonuse) by nonnative speakers indicates that this is not so" (p. 524).

Other researchers agree with Nation. In this article Salaberry quotes researchers who have pointed out "that inflectional endings are among the most difficult features of non-native languages for adult learners" (Schwartz , 1993, p. 100). There are disagreements, however, as to whether there should be any intervention in the acquisition of the inflectional morphology. The studies are somewhat inconclusive.

Salaberry tests these two approaches through a study that of 14 Spanish speakers in an ESL classroom setting. They shared the same native language and they had no opportunities to interact in English outside the classroom. They watched two movie clips and were asked to narrate them, first orally and then in writing. Based on the analysis, the author found the following: (1) the written narratives were slightly longer than the oral narratives; (2) learners used more present tense verbs in the oral narratives than in the written narrative, and (3) among verbs marked with past tense in both narratives, approximately twice as many were irregular verbs in the oral narratives.

This study confirms other studies that claim that monitoring affects how one uses verbs (more time to monitor, as in written exercises, produces more correct responses), and that learners most likely depend on lexically based processes as well as rule-based ones to mark the past tense (most frequent use of past tense is with the irregular past tense forms, that are also the most frequently used.) However, there are other psycholinguistic considerations that need to be investigated before any pedagogical conclusions are reached. These have to do with the learner's perception of what is important, individual orientation towards a task, and how categories and hierarchies are processed, as well as the learning environment. A learner appears to bring systematicity to language learning based on lexical knowledge as well as knowledge about the regular use of inflectional endings.

Schachter, J. (1998). Recent research in language learning studies: Promises and problems. *Language Learning* 48(4), 557-583.

Written from the perspective of a psycholinguist, this article considers three areas of SLA research: the language, the input, and the learner. It addresses the following questions: Why are certain L2 constructions learnable and others not? What is it that makes them difficult to acquire? Can adult learners take advantage of metalinguistic information about the L2? Do adults differ from children in the L2 input requirements? Does providing explicit language instruction confer any advantages on the learner? Do learners need to attend to form and to be aware of linguistic regularity in order to acquire it?

Schachter outlines the following learner characteristics:

- learners produce systematic errors, some attributable to L1 influence and some not;
- the order in which learners develop morphemes and construct the target language is not predictable by order of presentation or by frequency in the input;
- child L2 learners acquire much language implicitly, without a focus on form; and
- the way that adult learners process language input and develop grammar in the first language is not totally consistent with the way they process these in the target language.

The author discusses studies that illustrate some of the above patterns and describe areas that still need to be investigated, such as the following:

- while language immersion in the L2 works promotes language acquisition in children, it is not known whether it does with adults;
- there is no significant evidence that certain kinds of language input are influential in long-term memory retention.
- learning a language does not involve learning a whole series of sequential items, but rather learning sets of interrelated interactions.
- there are some indications that form is important in acquiring an L2, but research has been conducted only in immersion situations with children and that proves otherwise.

Finally, the author lists possible ways in which research studies could be conducted to investigate how adult learners acquire a second language. Before deciding whether explicit instruction helps adults, research is needed with adults. One such area of research is to "solve the question of very short-time versus longer-time studies in terms of long-term memory storage, and figure out the extent to which structures learned via controlled input presentation are incorporated into learners' grammars" (p. 579).

Schmitt, N. (1998). Tracking the incremental acquisition of second language vocabulary: A longitudinal study. *Language Learning*, 48(2), 281-317.

Educators and researchers have puzzled over how vocabulary is acquired. The author believes that this is not well understood because the studies tend to focus on the size and growth of lexicons-on how many words are learned or forgotten over time. He argues that studies should chart vocabulary development within individuals rather than make

generalizations, even across members of a homogeneous group. He also argues that studies should be longitudinal so that vocabulary acquisition and loss can be measured over time. Finally, he argues that mastery of a word requires more than just knowledge of its meaning and form.

This exploratory study tracks four advanced-level international university students who had never previously resided in a country where English was the first language. Based on a group of vocabulary items and individual interviews with each student, Schmitt looked at how they developed meaning knowledge (knowledge of the written form, spelling), association knowledge, and grammar knowledge over time. Participants were interviewed and asked to spell the target word (spelling). Then they were asked to state the first three words that came to their mind when they saw the word and it was determined whether these words were responses a native speaker (NS) would make or not. For example, if the word was "spur" the responses "quick" and "movement" were considered to be NS, and showed positive association knowledge. For grammar knowledge, they were asked to identify the part of speech of each target item.

Although the goal was to track the developmental sequencing of these knowledge areas, the author found that it was not possible with the study design. Also, four learners was a small number for the study.

Wang, W. (1999). Age and second language acquisition in adulthood: The learning experience and the perceptions of women immigrants. *TESL Canada Journal*, 16(2), 1-19.

Linguists have traditionally argued that beyond the critical period of puberty, the age at which one acquires a second language ceases to have a systematic effect on the acquisition of the second language (L2). There has been a belief that, after puberty, age-of-arrival in the country where the L2 is spoken is not a significant factor in L2 acquisition.

Recent studies, however (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Johnson & Newport, 1989) have indicated that a steep decline in ability to learn a second language, especially the aural/oral facets, occurs in age of arrival up to age 20. When age of arrival occurs after age of 20, the decline continues, but it is less steep.

Increasingly, however, research studies are finding that there may be a number of variables in the way adults acquire language. The author notes that few studies look at how adult learners of different ages and experience and perceive second language acquisition. She looks at whether the hypotheses of age and age-of-arrival (AOA) hold up if looked at from the learner's point of view.

The author interviewed 30 Mandarin-speaking ESL students (half were between the ages of 25-35; half, 40-55). The subjects were asked to assess their language learning experiences in social contexts, as individual learners, and from their classroom experiences. From the responses, the author discovered that adults perceive that age does have an effect on their acquiring an L2 and that age-of-arrival is a significant factor. Those who arrived in Canada between the ages of 25-25 were much more hopeful than those coming aft an older age that they would acquire English quickly. She concludes that because experiences and perceptions have an effect on L2 acquisition, it is inadequate to treat all learners the same, regardless of their ages. She corroborates H.B. Long's (1990) statement that it is erroneous to speak of

the adult ESL learner. She suggests that researchers might explore how age interacts with social variables that may constrain adult learners' language learning opportunities, particularly the relationships between age and L2 contact with the target community, age and anxiety in L2 oral communication, and age and self-confidence in learning an L2. She suggests that if teachers understand what kinds of language learning opportunities are available to learners outside the classroom, they can help bridge the gap between learning in the classroom and learning outside the classroom.

Weissberg, R. (1998) Acquiring English syntax through journal writing. *College ESL*, 8(1), 1-22.

When SLA is discussed, oral language is usually the focus. However, the development of syntactic proficiency through writing is increasingly used in adult programs, particularly in journal writing and in sharing individual stories. The author tested the hypothesis that L2 learners may acquire syntax in part by writing in their personal journals and writing in class. Five adult college-level English language learners, all non-literate in their L1, took part in the study. They were asked to write journal entries at home on self-selected personal topics and in class on academic topics selected by the teacher. The texts were analyzed for morpho-syntactic features to determine what modality (speech, academic writing, or journal writing) served as the primary medium for syntactic innovation and the development of grammatical accuracy. It appears that in this case, writing was favored over speech, and journal writing was particularly favored when working on grammatical accuracy. The informality of a personal journal combined with the privacy of writing seems to have a positive effect in L2 acquisition.

The instructor in this study wrote short perfunctory responses, rather than more extensive, conversational responses. Further research to see whether learners' writing development is increased even more when instructors extend learners' repertoires through more extended written discourse via the journal would be useful.

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